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# Be Not Afraid

Matthew 28:1-10

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 16, 2017,  
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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Around Easter time, we think about bunnies and eggs. Some of us think a lot more about chocolate. If you are a Christian, Easter should also make us think about angels. And what an entrance the angel makes. He should be a contestant on “Heaven’s Got Talent” because he’s a rock-n-roll type. What do I mean? Well, there’s a great earthquake, that rocks the world when he enters the stage of humanity from divinity’s home. And then he rolls back the stone and, like a tough guy, sits on top of it. He sits on the stone that had entombed the world in eternal death. He sits because he’s sure of eternal victory. The angel rocks and rolls this Easter morning. And this isn’t just any angel; this is, according to one Methodist professor, “a buff angel” (Alyce McKenzie). A gladiator-like angel, rolling back a sealed stone and then to show off his herculean muscles and attitude, sits on the stone with his ripped arms crossed, just in case you didn’t know he was the original “rolling stone.” Mick Jagger is great, but this angel is even better. He may not have the hair or the fitted jeans but his holy fans fawn after him and his lightning appearance and his fashion statement of all white clothing. What a drama when a new day is dawning, when hope seems to be rising, and joy begins permeating the atmosphere. This is better than chocolate candy bunnies.

Not everyone, though, is filled with hope by this Easter earthquake. “For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.” And the angel and Jesus tell the women at two different times, “Do not be afraid” and we are told that “[the women] left the tomb...with fear and great joy.” Not everyone experiences this day-breaking news, this new day, this new creation, in the same way. The empty tomb creates a lot of fear for some. “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.” A promise has been fulfilled but the emptiness of the tomb hangs heavy in some hearts and makes fear rampant. Ironically, the empty tomb feels like an empty promise. Emptiness can do this when it’s viewed as an abyss or nothingness, a dark infinite void that sucks hope dry. Some confuse the emptiness of Holy Saturday with the emptiness of Easter Sunday and think

*This is ground zero, emptiness and space  
With nothing left to say or think or do* (Malcolm Guite)

Fear comes, perhaps, because they never believed the word of Jesus in the first place, so the empty tomb comes as quite a surprise. They weren’t ready for this new day, but they can’t press the snooze button and stop it, even for a moment. If Jesus was still in the tomb, that would have made more sense to them. An empty tomb, however, means the future is still open, yet deep down they didn’t believe it, maybe we don’t believe it, even when a new day dawns, even when all signs point to it.

In George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when Winston, the book’s hero, resists the totalitarian regime and is sent to prison to be “rehabilitated,” the interrogator O’Brien tells him, “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever.” Perhaps those in Matthew’s gospel pictured the future as crucified peoples being laid in tombs forever. Through this perspective, the tombs would never be empty, only full of very dry bones. And sometimes death is

more believable than life because it is so pervasive in the world like fear. The presence of fear, so prominent in our story, can become—like Carolyn Koman writes in her book *What Jamie Saw*— “so settled inside us that we don’t even know what living feels like without it. That must be the thing about fear, the trick of it—you forget that that’s what it is because it just starts to feel like your life.” Thinking that life is just an eternal emptiness will do this and you’ll want to be like the guards and become like dead men and women. An empty tomb for some is seen as death because there appears to be no content in what should be a hopeful future. There’s only nothingness there, so it appears.

But early on Easter morning, on the day of resurrection, we discover there is something there. Like at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem and at his death, there’s an earthquake to shake up the world and the way we think and act. This Easter day, with the lightning of an angel and Easter lilies blowing in the Durham fields, should rock us to show us that nothing remains as it was on that day, impacting today. The resurrection destroys the status quo because like one commentator notes, “to meet Jesus [in this way] is for the ground to move beneath you” (Melinda Quivik). We can’t meet the resurrected Jesus without being shaken by his presence. It’s when things are empty, like an empty tomb or an empty life, that we will meet Jesus as we go, just like the women in our story did. Someone might say, “My life is empty!” That’s when Jesus can fill it! If the tomb wasn’t empty, we would only know a dead Jesus. And a living Jesus is so much more interesting than a dead one.

The rock-n-roll angelic movement of this day should shake us into seeing emptiness in a new way. When a Lakeland, Florida color blind man opened his 66th birthday present from his son and daughters, he had no idea how much his life was about to change. Noll Stafford had been colorblind since birth but when his family gave him a pair of EnChroma glasses he saw color for the first time. These glasses have received praise in Forbes magazine and the New York Times, and the Bloomberg Business journal refers to these glasses as “bioengineering the senses.” A mono-colored world for Stafford became technicolored in an instant because of these glasses. And in the same way, the resurrection is the eyeglasses through which we can view the world in different colors, in a different perspective, in which emptiness does not mean nothingness and darkness. In Christ, through the resurrection, emptiness is fullness, is somethingness, is technicolored light. Stafford, when speaking of his new glasses through his tears of joy, says, “It’s so clear. I can’t believe it.” This is what happens at the resurrection—some don’t believe because it’s so clear that it’s unbelievable.

Fear can cloud our vision and it’s a part of the human condition, but it’s also a part of Christian theological traditions. Surrounding good news often is the encouragement, “Don’t be afraid.” “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah, your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you will name him John.” “Don’t be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God and you will give birth to a son and name him Jesus.” “Don’t be afraid, shepherds. I bring you good news of great joy for all people.” “Don’t be afraid,” the angels and Jesus tell the women. Literally, “stop being afraid and keep not being afraid.” Through the lens of the rocking resurrection, even fear isn’t ultimately fatal, because the world looks different through an empty tomb. And if you can handle the darkness of a tomb and of a dawn, there’s nothing to fear going forward.

As a proverb declares, “Fear and courage are brothers” which means fear doesn’t have to control or stifle your life. Actually, the empty tomb can be a source of great joy but it takes courage to face the empty tomb and do as the angel urges, “Come, see the place where he lay.” The great liberator of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, urges us to believe that “The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.” The women had fear but also great joy and anticipation at the invitation of the angel to “Come, see the place where he lay.”

This is an invitation to experience the empty tomb that signifies a full future in God. The empty tomb signifies a bright future through the technicolored frame of the resurrection. It's an invitation to enter the open door of God, to walk into the future God has for us, not knowing what's next or where is next, but assured of who is next—Jesus Christ, the risen Savior. To enter the empty tomb is to see the vision of an open future for you and the world, to learn that the stone hasn't been rolled over our future but removed from it, assuring us that we have one. The women come into the tomb to go out on a mission. The stone was rolled away to let the witnesses *into* the resurrection life of Christ. Through Christ's absence in the emptiness of the tomb, we experience his presence today.

So the Easter earthquake cracks open a new understanding of emptiness. Emptiness not as negation or nothingness but emptiness as somethingness. Emptiness, an empty tomb, meaning that the possibilities for life are open forever. Emptiness, an empty tomb, as something that can be filled, a call to fill it with your gifts, talents, and time. An empty tomb is a clean slate, a new beginning. An open tomb is an openness to the unexpected, an openness to be filled, so when the earthquake hits on Easter morning, emptiness is changed forever. It is not a lack. It is a gain in Christ. We gain everything. We gain something—new life and hope, a future of joy, all because of an empty tomb.

With emptiness, some think nothing is there but something is there—the hope of our future together, that one day we will all be resurrected and made eternally alive. What was deemed nothing is something beyond our wildest dreams because emptiness is full of potential in the resurrected life of Christ. Just as a caterpillar's present existence is defined by its future as a butterfly, our “present existence is defined by the future God has for us” (Harry Balmires). An empty tomb is a womb of new birth, a future waiting to be born, but you have to enter it to receive your charge for your mission to go and tell. “Come, see the place where he lay.” The empty tomb is a call to fill the world with the resurrected life of Christ, to go and tell, because the resurrection draws us away from ourselves, away from tombs of indifference and inactivity, and opens pathways to action, freeing us to move and speak and worship Jesus at his feet. We can worship and work because of the joy of the resurrection, because the tomb is empty.

Philip was an eight-year-old boy born with Downs Syndrome. He went to Sunday School faithfully every week and was a part of a third-grade class with nine other eight-year olds. As you might imagine, Philip, with his differences, wasn't readily accepted by all of the eight year olds in his class. The teacher was sensitive to all of this and tried to do his best to make everyone feel a part of the group but it was difficult.

He came up with an idea for the Sunday after Easter. He collected ten big plastic egg containers, the ones that can be filled with Easter candy, and he gave one to each child. The assignment was for each child to go outside, find a symbol for new life, put it in the egg, and bring it back to the classroom for a time of sharing. The children ran wild all over the church property to find their symbols. When they got back to the classroom, they put all of the eggs on a table, and then the teacher began to open them as all the children gathered around. He opened one egg and there was a flower, and there were lots of “ooooos.” He opened another and there was a little butterfly—“aaaaahhhs.” He opened another and there was a rock. And then some “ohhhhs” and some laughter. The teacher then opened the next one and there was nothing inside. Some of the children blurted out, “That's not fair. That's stupid! Somebody didn't do it right.”

Then the teacher felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down. It was Philip and he said, "It's mine. That one is mine." Some of the children responded, "You don't ever do things right, Philip. There's nothing there!"

Philip summoned enough courage and said, "I did so do it right!" he said. "I did do it right. The tomb is empty!" Ironically, from that day forward, Philip became closer to the group of these eight year olds. But later that same year, due to other health issues, Philip died.

At his memorial service, these nine eight-year old children, along with their Sunday School teacher, marched up to the altar, not with flowers to cover or hide death, but with an empty egg container to show death's defeat; and they laid it on the altar.

Philip was right. The tomb is empty but our future isn't. Do not be afraid. He is not here for he has been raised. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord (1 Cor 15) and thanks be to God for empty eggs. Alleluia.